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Dan Horațiu POPESCU

## PLACES OF THE MIND: LAYERS OF THE TEXT & CONTEXT. PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR & FRIENDS

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In *Layers of the Text and Context. Patrick Leigh Fermor and Friends* Dan Horațiu Popescu traces the life and writings of a restless spirit. Patrick Leigh Fermor travelled and recorded his impressions of Europe in letters and travelogues. Romania was one of those places, and Popescu's declared intention in this book was "to uncover as much as possible from the four years the writer spent in Romania before World War II, and about which he wrote little" (13). In love with Balasha Cantacuzène, as the reader finds out in the very first chapter of *Layers*, Fermor lived with her at what was left of a larger estate, and in his notes he contrasted the harshness of the Romanian winter, where snow would gather in a thick layer and last "till spring" with "an indoor life of painting, writing, reading, talk, and lamp-lit evenings with Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Proust and Gide handy" (Fermor 2004, 44, quoted by Popescu, 23). In lines like these, Romania appears as a place upon which Fermor projected both his desires for the Other (Balasha and Romania) and his own literary imagination and culture. Using the tools of recent theories, Popescu's book takes the reader on a journey through Fermor's adventurous life and the world he saw and imagined.

The book is structured in three parts, with a coda. Since Popescu's declared aim is to follow Fermor's evolution as a writer, the first part revisits episodes and events of his becoming one. Thus, Fermor's first book is a "text on silence and solitude" (14), a result of the long time he spent in monastic shelters. The next

chapter reveals another layer of Fermor's becoming as reflected in his exchange of letters with Lawrence Durrell. This chapter continues the investigation of the interrelation of text and context by focusing on the two writers' deep and almost obsessive concern for the craft of writing and finding the ideal place to write, on the one hand, and for important political issues of the time, on the other. His affair with princess Balasha continued through the letters they exchanged in spite of the strict surveillance exerted by the Romanian secret services. Popescu notes that, from an attic in the small town of Pucioasa where the princess and her sister had been relocated, "Balasha would write more than two hundred letters to Paddy [Fermor], trying to avoid censorship by not giving many details on the hardships of everyday life, and sharing her opinions on people she had happened to meet before or on the books she avidly continued to read" (54), among which Proust's and Durrell's.

The second part of the volume is a further exploration of people and places, with a focus on the Romanian connections of Patrick Leigh Fermor and Sacheverell Sitwell. In the second chapter, this exploration is supported by food and dining. Popescu looks into Sacheverell Sitwell's book on Romania, published before his visit in 1937, where Sitwell described gargantuan feasts when he visited convents and square towers, and relates those episodes with passages from the writings of Patrick Leigh Fermor, with whom Sitwell had intellectual affinities. The chapter "Patrick Leigh Fermor: more Romanian ties" delves into Fermor's correspondence with Michel Alexis 'Bishi' Catargi. Here, Popescu tracks Bishi in a book, a tabloid, Fermor's selected letters, Fermor's Archive in the National Library of Scotland, and he discovers Bishi's friendship with Fermor, whom he met in Bucharest before World War II, and then they met again in 1990.

The third part of *Layers* focuses on the imagery of the Other: Gypsies (preferred over "Roma" because that was the term used by Fermor in his accounts), Jews and Turks in Fermor's writings. Popescu singles out the image of the Gypsies because it is another, more mysterious projection of the Other that one fears, and also for "the picturesque character of the descriptions and portrayals" (16). A whole literary tradition drawing on the exoticism of the Gypsies is traced from Ben Jonson, Shakespeare, Fielding, influenced by Cervantes' *La Gitanilla*, Wordsworth, Keats, Hazlitt, Matthew Arnold, and D. H. Lawrence. What Popescu reads in Fermor's descriptions and portrayals of Gypsies in Fermor's books is "a clash of mentalities, with modernity being under

the stress of being overcome by very ancient, almost primitive, ways of living” (p. 150). As far as Fermor’s accounts of interactions with Jews are concerned, Popescu invokes the figure of a Jewish scholar, whom he cannot help seeing through the stereotyping lens of a pre-Raphaelite painting, but with whom and his sons he has a compelling intellectual debate that dissipates at least some of his former prejudices. “Central Europe and the *perennial other*” is yet another focus on othering, being triggered by the latest waves of migration and the fear of the Islamization of Europe. This chapter tackles “the image of the Turks as the *Perennial Other* in Central Europe” (16-17), a consequence of the alarming expansion of the Ottoman Empire from the 14th century onwards. A nostalgic note is struck by the disappearance of the community on the island of Ada Kaleh, which is contrasted to the Ottoman glory of the past. Popescu dedicates the next chapter to the travelogue as “a narrative of displacement, in which the authors find it sometimes odd or challenging to attach themselves to places and times” (p. 17). Approaching closure, the last chapter in this part looks into “The Pain of Writing as Reflected in Patrick Leigh Fermor’s Correspondence” with his friend Rudolf Fischer. The contexts of their intense exchange of letters is never neglected: Hungary and Transylvania, with their turmoils, are in the background.

Circularly, the book ends with a part titled suggestively THE QUEST RESUMED, which contains the chapter “Walking to Byzantium,” an intertextual echo of Yeats’s poem. This section connects artistic vocation with the quest for spirituality, and it looks into the biographies and works of the nineteenth century artist Edward Lear, and two twentieth century travel writers: Patrick Leigh Fermor, the protagonist of Popescu’s book, and Bruce Chatwin. The spiritual quest these artists and travellers took was to Mount Athos. Ultimately, the author of *Layers of the Text and Context. Patrick Leigh Fermor and Friends* sees the book as “an *opera aperta*” (18) since it gathers moments of research and envisages more to follow. Indeed, in 2022, a sequel titled *Rudolf Fischer & Patrick Leigh Fermor. Letters from (and to) a Penitent Central European* was published at Oradea University Publishing House.